

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Robert McNamara's Bad Information

Former secretary of defense Robert McNamara did not need to wait 31 years to determine that the second 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident never happened [Around the World, Nov. 10]. While still in office, all he had to do was take a more careful look at the "unimpeachable" proof he offered to Congress to demonstrate that the Aug. 4 incident occurred.

As a member of the staff of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations who worked on Vietnam matters throughout the 10-year course of the war, I feel compelled to help set the record straight.

The so-called second incident led to passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which the Johnson administration relied on as congressional approval for waging war in Vietnam. At the time, Lyndon Johnson was running for reelection as the peace candidate against Barry Goldwater and was anxious to obtain congressional endorsement of his then cautious approach to U.S. involvement. In fact, for months State Department files had held such a draft

resolution, waiting only for an incident to spring it on Congress.

The first incident on Aug. 2 was not deemed sufficient provocation. But after Mr. Johnson received assurances from Mr. McNamara and defense officials that U.S. ships had been attacked again, the second "incident" triggered U.S. military retaliation and a request for congressional support. Congress, relying on "facts" supplied by Mr. McNamara, passed the resolution with only two dissenting votes.

As early as 1965, the committee began receiving information that challenged the McNamara version of events. This led to a staff investigation that Mr. McNamara's department resisted. Only through the intervention of Sen. Richard Russell (D-Ga.), then Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, did the Defense Department grudgingly turn over some documents the Foreign Relations Committee requested. Contrary to Mr. McNamara's assertions, this investigation provided not only no proof of a second incident but, indeed, the evidence was convincing that a second incident did not happen.

In testimony before the committee in 1968, Mr. McNamara stressed the "unimpeachable nature" of the proof that both incidents had happened. That proof boiled down to several National Security Agency (NSA) intercepts of messages from the North Vietnamese navy. He refused to allow the committee to keep copies of the intercepts or for its staff to see them, citing lack of proper clearances.

Years later, at Sen. J. William Fulbright's request, Melvin Laird, Richard Nixon's secretary of defense, arranged for NSA officials to allow Carl Marcy, committee staff director, and myself to see the texts of the intercepts. Of the several messages we were allowed to scan, only one was from Aug. 4. The others clearly related to the incident on Aug. 2.

My reading of the Aug. 4 intercept was that it was a boastful summary of the attack on Aug. 2. Even the NSA officials could not say that it definitely related to the Aug. 4 action. In addition, the time sequence of the intercept and the reported action from the U.S. Navy destroyers did not jibe. Curiously, NSA could not find the original of the Aug. 4 intercept, although it did have originals of the others.

President Johnson relied on the erroneous information from Mr. McNamara and others to justify U.S. military retaliation and stampede Congress to give him a blank check. As one anonymous tipster to the committee put it at the time, Mr. Johnson "simply put his trust in the wrong people." And Robert McNamara is a major figure in that fatal mistake.

It's high time the Gulf of Tonkin intercepts, and the interpretations put on them at that time, were made public. No purpose can be served by keeping such critical pieces of history secret.

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